

"Reading, of course, is one of the prime pursuits in Washington, which is essentially a white-collar city. There is the inevitable concern with studies and reports, and presumably someone reads the Congressional Record, though no one has ever accused it of having much literary quality. Books on government and politics and foreign affairs, whether philosophical or gossipy, have a higher currency than in most cities. But genuine literature is a minority preoccupation.

"Probably the leading indoor sport is conversation. People don't dine out at glamorous eating places. They meet in social gatherings in the home. Here the life of the mind and spirit is cultivated, if it is cultivated seriously, through books, records, and good talk. There are, of course, many thoughtful, sensitive people in Washington, and their conversation is capable of ranging widely over the gamut of human concerns. In this respect the Capital is like a college town with an impressive intellectual elite. But how often does conversation go beyond the immediate events and personalities of the day's news?

"How does Washington compare as a cultural center with other capitals. Let us agree not to judge the city by the criteria of London, Paris, and Moscow, which are their nations' largest urban communities. Let us even skip Rome, which is not Italy's principal economic center, but which offers the grandeur of antiquity and the renaissance as well as opera house, ballets, theaters, orchestra, conservatory, and art in abundance.

"Compare Washington with a small capital like Brussels, which has opera, ballet, orchestra, theaters, and a highly cultivated population, and the outcome is to our discredit. Compare Washington with a provincial town like Tiflis, more than a thousand miles from Moscow. The Soviet city beyond the Caucasus has an opera house, a ballet, four professional theaters, several children's theaters, and a proud cultural tradition.

"What is the explanation for Washington's shortcomings. You hear a variety of excuses:

"The city is not an industrial center, has no big business, and not enough huge fortunes, and these are the sources which nowadays supply the sinews of artistic activity.

"The city has a large transient population dependent on the whims of the national electorate every 4 years. As proof of what this means culturally, it is pointed out that patronage for plays and concerts in 1953, the changeover year in administrations, dropped sharply.

"Like it or not, the city's business, after all, is politics and government, and, while its residents embrace a substantial percentage of intelligent, cultivated men and women, they have no choice but to concentrate on affairs of state rather than on artistic trends.

"Washington's high society, with honorable exceptions, does not find satisfaction in supporting the arts as extensively as in other great capitals because it is absorbed in a social whirl involving bigwigs in the Government and the diplomatic corps, not forgetting visiting potentates. It has become more glamorous to be a persistently successful hostess than a devoted supporter of the arts.

"There is merit in these reasons, though the cause lies deeper. Washington is what it is culturally because it reflects, more truly than it knows or perhaps would like, attitudes prevalent in many parts of the land. But that is not a compelling excuse. For the Capital should set the tone—it should lead. It is not good enough to let Washington off by saying that standards in the things of the mind and spirit are ordinary in many parts of the country.

"Granted that the most popular entertainments on television, the successful films, and many bestselling books do not meet lofty criteria; granted that in this great prosperous country professional theaters outside of New York are scarce; granted that only a small percentage of our people listen to great music and look at great paintings; granted that the sales figures of the most dazzling bestsellers are a small percentage of the potential reading public—these things do not absolve the Capital City of responsibility; on the contrary, they increase it. Washington should be in the vanguard. It should be a proud national showplace in the arts.

"The thousands of American visitors who stream through the city each year should be encouraged not simply to go sightseeing, but to expose themselves to fresh experiences in the arts. The National Symphony, thanks to Mrs. Herbert May, a woman of wealth, devotes a number of weeks in the spring to free concerts for visiting school boys and girls. But these youngsters should also encounter an eye-opening diversity of theater, opera, and dance. Their fathers, mothers, elder sisters, cousins, and aunts should also find in the Capital a choice and inspiring invitation to cultural adventure.